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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of feedback in effective communication and ways in which feedback can assist library managers at all levels in performing their role as leaders. The various kinds and sources of feedback are discussed, and the relationship between feedback and goal setting are considered, as well as the effects of goal setting and feedback on satisfaction and performance. The role of feedback in library personnel evaluation is described, and guidelines for feedback to employees are provided. Two problems concerning performance appraisal in libraries today are identified: inadequate time and preparation for the supervisor to provide feedback, and the frequency of appraisals. The effect of feedback on self-confidence is examined, and a discussion of the importance of feedback in library management concludes the paper. (22 references) (MES)

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LEADERSHIP IN LIBRARIES - FEEDBACK AS COMMUNICATION

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Leadership in Libraries - Feedback as Communication

Communication is one of the most discussed topics in many libraries. This discussion takes place in both formal meetings and in informal employee exchanges. In many libraries it is given lip service more than it is practiced. In these libraries it may sometimes seem that the only communication taking place is about the need to communicate. The various departments and activities of libraries are so interdependent that failure to communicate may have a negative impact on library service.

Although man has communicated with each other from pre-history the focus on communication as a science can be traced to the 1920's and 1930's. Since that time communication theories have developed and communications research has been based on the scientific method. The concept of feedback, which is an important concept in communication, was introduced by Norbert Weiner in 1948 in his book, Cybernetics.[1]

Researchers of the early human relations movement in management supported open communication between employee and supervisor. It was believed that this communication would relieve employee stress and enable the supervisor to discover additional sources of employee motivation.[2]

This paper will focus on the role of feedback in effective communication and will discuss ways in which feedback can assist the supervisor in performing his role as a leader. In this paper supervisor will be used to refer to all levels of

management from supervisors to directors of libraries. Leadership is expected to be a function of supervisors at every level. Employee will refer to all employees with the assumption that feedback should occur both from top-down and in an upward direction. Using this terminology the same individual could be identified as both employee and supervisor. The size of the library and the organization chart will influence how much interaction the director has with employees. It is important, however, that the director have some contact with every member of his staff in order to establish himself as leader and to avoid morale problems and feelings of alienation.

"Feedback is any verbal or nonverbal element that facilitates or inhibits understanding, controls or influences the flow of messages and satisfaction in interactions, and enables us to adapt or adjust those messages."[3] Any remark, any action, or even the absence of speech or action may supply feedback and may be interpreted as conveying a message. In the absence of verbal feedback an employee will come to his own conclusions which may be incorrect. In a work relationship feedback to the employee enables him to determine if his actions are accurate and satisfactory and indicates what changes are necessary in order for him to perform satisfactorily. Feedback also serves as a motivator.[4]

There are many kinds of feedback: intrinsic or extrinsic, negative or positive, verbal or nonverbal, top-down or upward.

Feedback may come from a number of sources. These include the organization, the supervisor, co-workers, the task itself, and the employee himself. In libraries feedback may come from patrons, trustees, deans, co-workers, or supervisors. All of these may influence the employee's attitude toward his job. The emphasis here is on verbal, extrinsic feedback usually from top-down. The most valuable feedback is that which comes from a supervisor or someone who has an understanding of the job's requirements.[5]

Both Greller[6] and Quagleri[7] found that feedback from supervisors ranked high among available sources of feedback. Greller's study showed that employees depended most heavily on feedback from the supervisor in determining job requirements. Quagleri's research ranked the supervisor as the second most useful source of feedback.

Performance feedback, also known in the business literature as knowledge of results, has been recognized as an important facet of employee training, performance, motivation, and satisfaction. Researchers have investigated goal setting, feedback, knowledge of results, and praise in relation to task performance.[8]

Closely related to feedback is the subject of goal setting. An examination of the library literature reveals a dearth of references to feedback or goal setting. One finds many references to information on library planning. In the planning

literature there are numerous discussions about setting goals, identifying roles, and using strategic or long-range planning. Most of these references, however, discuss goals or planning for the library as an organization instead of individual goal setting. It is in the establishment and accomplishment of personal performance goals that feedback may be most effective.

One of the most controversial unresolved issues pertaining to feedback is this relationship between feedback and goal setting. It is not clear whether increased performance is the result of feedback or is a product of the goal setting process. The idea that motivational effect attributed to feedback is actually due to goal setting has drawn support from a number of well-designed studies. In the majority of these studies feedback about performance in relation to the goal was always present when the effect occurred.[9]

In 1976 Kim and Hamner conducted a study to determine the effect of goal setting and feedback on productivity and satisfaction. The variable in the study was the amount of feedback each group received. All groups set MBO type goals. The results showed that goal setting alone could improve performance without a formal feedback program. However, when self-generated knowledge of results, supervisory feedback, and praise were added to the goal setting program performance generally experienced a greater increase. This study gained credibility through the use of an organizational setting and

the use of the same measurements of performance which the organization normally used for determining monthly efficiency. This study failed to examine feedback in the absence of a goal setting program. This is a pertinent area of research since part of the unresolved controversy relates to the effect of feedback alone on performance.[10]

The effect of feedback on performance though clearly confirmed has not been fully explained. A study which addressed the different aspects of feedback concluded that the exact meaning of the dimension remains highly uncertain.[11]

Matsui and Okada found that employees with low ability tended to put forth more effort when receiving goal feedback. Unless employees receive feedback they are unable to evaluate their performance objectively. A situation without feedback would not improve performance even if goals were present.[12] Other studies have found that harder goals with feedback resulted in improved performance.

Improvements in performance and satisfaction which were attributed to goal setting and feedback will begin to dissipate in six to nine months.[13] Other researchers have studied the effect of feedback on persistence of task improvement. Payne and Hauty tested different feedback methods in combination with other variables, including the administration of drugs to effect performance. Under some of their test conditions proficiency did improve for the immediate short term.[14]

It is important that library supervisors understand the relationship of change in task performance to persistency of that change. Change of short duration will require reinforcement by the continued use of feedback and reviewing goals or setting new ones. Attention to rewards and an effort to see that employees are rewarded in the manner which promised or expected is also important in maintaining the change.

Praise is one type of feedback which the supervisor may provide based on the employee's performance. Praise is one of the most powerful kinds of feedback available. Goals or standards for the accomplishment of a task enables the supervisor to observe the results and to offer feedback to the employee. This is extrinsic feedback and when positive can be expected to strengthen the desired performance. Withholding praise for unacceptable performance should encourage the employee to improve his level of performance. This is intrinsic feedback since no overt action by the supervisor has taken place. Failure by the supervisor to give feedback on any behavior regardless of its relationship to goals or performance will eliminate the performance and motivational advantages of positive results.[15]

The library literature is rich with information about performance appraisal, also referred to as performance evaluation or personnel evaluation. Much has been written concerning the types of evaluation, when evaluations should be

done, the legal aspects of evaluation, and who should be evaluated. In this context the concern is for the role of feedback in performance evaluation and how the supervisor interacts with the employee concerning the evaluation.

The most valuable aspect of performance appraisal is lost if the time and opportunity for feedback is not provided as an integral part of the process. In many libraries performance evaluation is mainly targeted for providing management data. The feedback to employees can also contribute to management's goals if it is used as a conduit which permits or encourages a two-way dialogue between supervisor and employee.

Feedback to employees should adhere to the following guidelines:

(1) Express the feedback specifically and clearly.

(2) Avoid a judgmental approach. Statements should be behavior-oriented.

(3) Give feedback promptly. It is more effective if given close to the time at which the event occurred.

(4) Focus on actions over which the employee has some control.[16]

Ilgen and Knowlton completed research in which they tested feedback distortion to determine if evaluators inflated their ratings when they were required to give feedback to the employees being rated. It was found that supervisors do tend to give higher performance ratings when face to face feedback

is given. Supervisors also tend to give inflated ratings when poor performance is believed to be more attributable to lack of ability than to lack of effort. The effect of these two factors would tend to result in the employee receiving a higher rating than is warranted. The ratings given seem to be strongly influenced by the degree to which supervisors perceived that the employee did or did not work hard.[17]

Employees tend to overestimate their own performance even when clear and straight forward feedback is given. One reason for the tendency to do so may be caused by the failure to be specific in presenting feedback. Supervisors tend to consider the feedback given as more specific than does the employee. Another reason for employees seeing their performance more favorably may be caused by supervisors who gave a rating and then tried to explain it away if it were unsatisfactory. Negative feedback is unpleasant. Employees may cushion its impact by denying or downplaying the ratings. Employees who do not perform well tend to blame outside forces such as working conditions, quality of tools, etc. Supervisors are more likely to blame the employee's lack of ability or lack of effort for poor performance.[18]

The relationship between the supervisor and the employee in the performance feedback exchange becomes an important factor in how effective that feedback will be. The individual perceptions of each are integral to the role of feedback in

the organization. Research which focused on the relationship between the status of the source of the message and the acceptance of the feedback indicated that when the feedback is positive source status made little difference. However, status of the source is important if the message is negative.[19] High status individuals may be able to effectively deliver negative feedback.

Two problems concerning performance appraisal as it exists in libraries today are inadequate time and preparation for the supervisor to provide feedback, and the frequency of appraisals. The frequency of performance appraisals varies but often they are done every six months, once a year, or less frequently. The evidence indicates that the frequency and timing of the feedback affects its impact. Iglen and his associates found the variables which influenced feedback were personal characteristics such as seniority, education, age, sex and self-esteem; employees perceptions of the supervisor concerning power, trust, and knowledge of subordinate's job; and the feedback itself in relation to timing, specificity, consideration for employee by the supervisor, frequency, and sign (negative or positive).[20]

Feedback and performance have been studied from the viewpoint of providing feedback to employees by their supervisors. The majority of research studies have followed this configuration. The literature reports a study in which

supervisors were given feedback from employees concerning their performance. Of the supervisors involved in the study those who received feedback and set goals based on that feedback received significantly higher ratings in their performance. This illustrates that supervisors are able to respond to and profit from the same type of feedback situations as employees. This aspcet of feedback utilization warrants additonal investigation.[21]

In considering the effect of feedback on self-confidence the literature supports the fact that feedback seems to lessen women's tendencies to downgrade their prospects for success. McCarty undertook an investigation to verify conclusions that extrinsic feedback can raise women's self-confidence level to equal that of men. Her results supported the theory that without feedback women are more likely than men to lack confidence for completing a task and to judge themselves more harshly. She revealed that in situations providing feedback women's self-confidence never reached that of men even when identical feedback was received. Women who received strong positive feedback did not reach confidence levels any higher than those held by men who received no feedback. In as much as motivation is related to self-confidence this handicaps women in achieving success in the work environment. This suggests to supervisors that precedence in providing feedback should be given to women because men may feel equally self-confident without feedback.[22]

This study has particular implications for management in libraries when one considers that the ratio of women librarians to men librarians is almost five to one.[23] If library support staff are also considered the ratio of women to men is even greater.

Performance evaluation when accompanied by a sound feedback program can assist library personnel in career development and professional growth. New employees need to receive regular feedback so they may assess how well they are performing. Attention to such feedback will enable the supervisor to determine how well the employee and the job are matched. Some systems specify intervals of six months, one year or even longer. More frequent feedback is needed to correct misunderstandings or lack of knowledge before unacceptable work-habits are established.

Academic librarians who may be in line for tenure or promotion require feedback in order to know if they are developing in the areas to be evaluated. Professional growth, job performance, and over-all competence may not develop as necessary without information which indicates where improvements are needed.[24]

Librarians and support staff want to know about their work. One writer has noted, "Nothing seems to bother people more than just being ignored. We appear to prefer any response--even a negative one--to no response at all. Not

only are people distressed when they are met with unresponsiveness; they are also discouraged from taking any initiative in the future."[25]

A consultant was hired to investigate reasons why one library was experiencing so many problems. Morale was low, many mistakes were being made, production was low, and there seemed to be little concern about service. As he talked with members of the staff he repeatedly heard remarks such as "Nobody knows I'm here," "It doesn't make any difference what I do nobody ever pays any attention," or "Nobody tells me when changes are made." As he continued to delve into work relationships and the library operation he soon recognized lack of communication as a major problem. The director entered and left by a side entrance and was seldom seen by anyone except his secretary and a couple of assistant directors. When he did move about the library he was withdrawn and seldom spoke to the employees. Staff meetings were seldom held with months or even years elapsing between meetings. There were no established channels of communication. No system existed for dissemination of information.

The consultant noted these comments. He observed and listened closely to determine where information was being generated and at what point communication was breaking down. When his report was completed and recommendations were made the director was surprised that the answer to the major

problems was so "simple." Attention to exchange of information and plans for communication became a high priority. Regular meetings were scheduled, not just for the sake of meeting but with a purpose and an agenda. It was found that there was more to talk about and share than had been expected.

The problems did not disappear overnight. Communication is never "simple" and it requires work. Gradually with adequate feedback in both directions conditions began to improve. Absences due to illness decreased, morale was higher, and once again the focus was on service.

Charles Bunge surveyed librarians and support in libraries to determine what they perceived as sources of satisfaction or sources of stress in their jobs. In an article in Library Journal he reported that feedback was targeted as both a source of stress and a source of satisfaction. When employees received positive feedback, including recognition and appreciation, it served as a source of satisfaction. When positive feedback was not given to the employees its absence was identified as a source of stress.[26]

Several studies have found that the degree to which employees receive feedback concerning their success and performance is significantly and negatively correlated with burnout. Burnout was less when more feedback was given the employees.[27]

In her book, The Librarian's Psychological Commitments, Florence DeHart describes feedback as a behavioral skill and identifies three aspects of interaction relating to feedback. These are giving feedback, receiving feedback, and requesting feedback. When one is not comfortable giving direct feedback he may be tempted to add an escape clause, thus compounding the problem. Giving feedback should focus on a behavior description specific enough for the other person to identify the behavior to which one is referring. Requesting feedback is a situation in which the employee solicits an appraisal of his work and service. The use of feedback in a cogent manner will reduce indirect negative feedback heard by the grapevine. Critical inquiry seeks clarification of negative criticism.[28]

Library directors generally establish the attitude towards communication within the library. The importance which he places on feedback will determine how much time and effort is devoted to providing feedback to library staff at all levels. There are many aspects to communication in libraries. Feedback is pivotal in training, goal setting, and performance evaluation. Cargill and Webb have called performance evaluation an effective management tool. They identified the advantages of the process as the fostering of honest communication between supervisors and employees, the development of opportunities for feedback, the provision of

a basis for appropriate continuing education, the creation of organizational support, and the fostering of improved performance which contributes to growth and development.[29]

The attention with which researchers have regarded the feedback/goal setting/performance relationship continues to produce research studies to analyze nuances overlooked or ignored in previous studies, and to examine new factors which might bear on this relationship in the organization.

The literature of management, applied psychology, and to some extent library science, provides ample evidence to convince those responsible for leadership in libraries that feedback is one of the most effective facets of communication available to them.

Whether a library is involved in participatory management or a more autocratic approach to management the employees find it easier to provide service and reach their goals when they are aware of what is expected of them and why. Rebecca Kroll believes that, "The library which keeps everyone well informed of future plans so that staff can see where they fit into the overall scheme will have a more energetic and enthusiastic workforce than if the staff feels they 'never know what is going on'."[30]

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